

Learners' Beliefs about English Language Learning in the Context of Tertiary Education With Reference to the Undergraduates of the University of Moratuwa

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Abstract: With the paradigm shift from teacher centred learning to student centred learning, the learner is considered as an active participant in the learning process. Hence, understanding learner beliefs about language learning is essential to plan and implement effective language instruction. The paper aims to study whether learner beliefs in learning English is a determining factor to achieve the outcomes of teaching English as a second Language. Thus, the English language learning beliefs held by undergraduates of the University of Moratuwa was examined. This study employed a mixed approach. The learners' beliefs were captured through questionnaires and interviews adapted from BALLI framework. The findings reveal that the undergraduates have confidence in their own learning ability as they perceive English not as a difficult language to learn. It also gives an insight for teachers to incorporate more communicative student- centred learning activities. Thus learners' beliefs not only reflect their beliefs and perceptions on how they learn but also inform the strategies that can be adopted to enhance the teaching of English as a second language at tertiary level.

Keywords: Learner beliefs, English language learning, Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI)

Introduction

With the paradigm shift from teacher-centered to student-centered teaching, the focus is on the learners. Thus the learner is an active participant in the language learning process. The learners' beliefs, perceptions, strategies and motivation become integral elements in the preparation and implementation of effective language instruction (Horwitz 1999). In this way, as teachers, we have to view language learners as individuals approaching language learning in their own unique way. She further claims that learner beliefs have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners. This is in concurrence with the view of Flavell (1987) who states beliefs about language learning as a component of metacognitive knowledge, which include all that they understand about themselves as learners and thinkers, including their goals and needs. His study also focuses on the person. He calls this "person knowledge" that has been acquired from cognitive and affective factors such as learner aptitude, personality, and motivation that may influence learning. Further, Wenden (2001) states it as the specific knowledge about how the above factors apply in their experience.

With globalization, English continues to play a distinctive role not only to cross borders but also for survival in Sri Lanka. Thus, the ability to communicate in English has become an urgent need to all levels of learners in Sri Lanka. In this context, it is a dire necessity to develop the competency of English among the undergraduates as they need English not only for their higher studies but also for their professional career. Despite many attempts, it is a sad state that the attainment level in English is not at a satisfactory level in Universities. This problem is greatly felt by the undergraduates of the rural area who are deprived of the opportunities enjoyed by the English knowledgeable ones. They are unable to compete in their job market due to their incompetency in English Language. Moreover, the Academics involved in teaching English to adults need to find the determining factors that can enhance the teaching and learning process. As such, learners' beliefs and perceptions are significant learner variables in determining the effectiveness of teaching and learning. When teachers incorporate the identified learner beliefs and reflect on their potential impact on language learning and teaching, this can inform future syllabus design and the strategies that can be adopted to enhance the teaching and learning process.

This study examines the learners' beliefs in learning English at tertiary level in local context in order to discover whether learners' beliefs in learning English is a contributory factor in teaching English at tertiary level.

The questions addressed in this study are:

1. What are the learners' beliefs about learning English at tertiary level of education?
2. How do these learner beliefs contribute to the effectiveness of English language learning and teaching?

Literature Review

Educational goals and English Language teaching approach in Sri Lanka.

Since the late 1980s, the Sri Lankan Educational System has attempted to adopt Communicative approach in teaching English in schools (National Institute of Education 1999) as well as in tertiary educational institutions. The degree programs offered by the state University system are planned towards outcome-based education (OBE) using student-centred learning (Ministry of Higher Education 2002). One of the national goals of tertiary education is to produce readily employable graduates who can think intellectually, act confidently and communicate effectively. So students' potential should be developed in a holistic and integrated manner to promote national integration. In the context of teaching English, focus must be on the teaching of four skills and language contents i.e. grammar, pronunciation and vocabulary by advocating the communicative approach. It becomes mandatory to enhance students' communicative skills through the integration of four skills and language contents through 'realistic and authentic' tasks that stimulate real-life conditions.

Approaches to investigate learners' beliefs

Barcelos (2006), identifies three approaches i.e. the normative, the metacognitive and the contextual approach to investigate learners' beliefs. According to Hofer & Pintrich (2004), they vary in terms of the concept of beliefs i.e. whether beliefs are considered stable or dynamic, individual or contextual, and the relationship between beliefs and actions. The normative approach sees beliefs as individuals' stable 'preconceived notions, myths or misconceptions' (Horwitz 1988). A Likert scale questionnaire such as the Beliefs About Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) developed by Horwitz (1985) is always used in this approach. The metacognitive approach defines beliefs as metacognitive knowledge that constitutes their 'theories in action' (Wenden 1987). It investigates beliefs through content, analyses of data obtained from semi-structured interviews and self-reports. The contextual approach views beliefs as contextual, dynamic and social. It encompasses collecting data through ethnographic classroom observations, case studies, metaphor analyses and discourse analyses. Both the normative and metacognitive approaches posit a direct beliefs-actions relationship, whereas the contextual approach suggests the possibility of inconsistent beliefs-actions relationships due to contextual refrains.

Beliefs about Language Learning Inventory (BALLI) model

The normative approach is characterized by the use of Likert-scale questionnaires in the investigation of learner beliefs. BALLI is an instrument designed to assess teachers' opinions on several issues related to language learning. In a brain-storming session, 25 foreign language teachers in the United States listed their beliefs, other people's beliefs, and their students' beliefs about language learning. After eliminating the idiosyncratic beliefs, the list was examined and added more beliefs. The instrument was then piloted with 150 first-semester foreign language students at The University of Texas at Austin (Horwitz 1985). BALLI employs a 5-point Likert-type scale ranging from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree'. It has been revised three times; the final version contains 34 items. It comprises five themes: (i) foreign language aptitude, (ii) difficulty of language learning, (iii) nature of language learning, (iv) learning and communication strategies and (v) motivation and expectation.

BALLI's validity is criticized by Kuntz (1996) for its teachers-generated items/themes, the lack of explanations for the generated themes, and the over-reliance on descriptive statistics. Nevertheless, studies employing factor analysis conducted by Yang (1999) and Park (1995), have proven BALLI's validity in the Asian context. BALLI has also been endorsed for its applicability as a tool for assessing learners' beliefs.

Horwitz (1987), stated, second language learners often hold different beliefs or notions about language learning, some of which are influenced by students' previous experiences as language learners, and

others that are shaped by their own cultural backgrounds. In her review of representative studies based on her questionnaire, BALLI, she further claims that individual differences, such as age, stage of life, learning style, educational experiences, and learning circumstances, including instructional levels, family, language learning contexts, likely account for as much variation as cultural differences (Horwitz 1999). Based on the assumption that individual differences and learning circumstances likely account for as much variation as cultural differences, research has also proven that learners' beliefs may have the potential to influence both their experiences and actions as language learners, and there are links between beliefs, motivation, and strategy use (Horwitz 1988).

A study was conducted by Chai (2013), employing BALLI questionnaire to examine the English Language learning beliefs held by Malaysian National Secondary School (NSS) and the Malaysian Independent Chinese Secondary School (MICSS) English as second language (ESL) students. This study revealed that the MICSS and the NSS students' beliefs differ primarily on their perceptions of the important expectations of learning English and their English language learning practices. Despite the individual differences in educational background and previous English learning experiences, racial demographics, the most salient difference is in their endorsement for the translation method in learning English. Besides, there were three additional ESL learner beliefs discovered in this study: English teachers' race/culture/mother tongue, ideal English classroom, and motivation in relation to techniques/activities employed in the classroom and teachers' choice of content. It shows that the NSS students' beliefs are closer to the learner-centered principles but the MICSS students' beliefs are still determined by their traditional learning experiences and their classmates. This mirrored the stronger collectivistic learning culture in the MICSS.

As cited in Chai (2013), generally, students agree with the existence of English language ability Peng & Hui (2012) but disparage their own English language aptitude Chang & Shen (2006); Riley (2006); Wu (2008). Peng & Hui (2012). Wu (2008) and Huang & Tsai (2003) rationalize such a scenario with students' unsuccessful English learning experiences. Even though students generally perceive English as a difficult language Wu (2008); Hong (2006); Li (2011), they tend to underestimate the difficulty of learning English Fujiwara (2011); Peng & Hui (2012); Riley (2006); Sioson (2011). Students' opinions are divided on whether learning English is about acquiring grammar rules, vocabulary and translating ability. Peacock (1999) and Wu (2008) present students' agreement about the importance of learning grammar while Ghobadi Mohebi and Khodadady (2011), Li (2011) and Riley (2006) report otherwise. Vocabulary learning has always been valued (Fujiwara 2011; Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady 2011; Wu 2008). Conversely, students do not agree they should translate to and from their own mother tongue (Ghobadi Mohebi & Khodadady 2011; Riley 2006). The issues in this category have always been on the students' willingness to guess, tolerance for mistakes, and their view towards the roles of repeating and practising. Most studies including the study Peng & Hui (2012) report students' appreciation of the three aforementioned aspects. All Asian students are motivated to speak good English (Peng & Hui 2012). Nevertheless, only 50% of them believe that they can speak English successfully.

Methodology: This study employed a mixed approach. Though, the place where research is conducted belongs to the urban setting, the sample of my study is from both urban and rural areas reading their degree programme in English medium at the University of Moratuwa. Sixty four first year undergraduate from the faculty of Engineering were selected as the sample of study using the simple random sampling method. A questionnaire was administered among my sample group. The questionnaire was designed with 20 items adapted from BALLI that addressed the five categories of BALLI framework. This methodology was complemented with focus group interviews to seek clarification of the questionnaire data. The secondary data was collected through library research and internet.

Analysis of data:

Table1: Summary of the data from questionnaire

		Strongly agree		Agree		Disagree		Strongly disagree	
1	It is difficult to learn English.	0	0.00%	12	18.75%	38	59.38%	14	21.88%
2	Learning to read and write in English is easier than to listen or	6	9.38%	20	31.25%	32	50.00%	6	9.38%

	speak.								
3	It is easier to speak than to understand English	2	3.13%	22	34.38%	32	50.00%	8	12.50%
4	I believe that I will learn to speak English very well.	44	68.75%	20	31.25%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
5	I want to learn to speak English well.	54	84.38%	10	15.63%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
6	It is important to speak English with good pronunciation.	30	46.88%	30	46.88%	4	6.25%	0	0.00%
7	You shouldn't speak English until you can speak fluently.	6	9.38%	2	3.13%	22	34.38%	34	53.13%
8	You should speak English whether it is right or wrong.	30	46.88%	26	40.63%	8	12.50%	0	0.00%
9	I enjoy talking in English with my lecturer and colleagues who speak English.	28	43.75%	28	43.75%	6	9.38%	2	3.13%
10	I guess if I don't know a word in English.	8	12.50%	26	40.63%	16	25.00%	14	21.88%
11	The most important part of learning English is learning grammar.	6	9.38%	44	68.75%	14	21.88%	0	0.00%
12	The most important part of learning English is learning vocabulary words.	16	25.00%	34	53.13%	14	21.88%	0	0.00%
13	In learning English, it is important to practice a lot.	30	46.88%	20	31.25%	14	21.88%	0	0.00%
14	I feel shy to speak English with other people	6	9.38%	24	37.50%	20	31.25%	14	21.88%
15	I don't think it's necessary to be able to speak in English to live in Sri Lanka.	6	9.38%	12	18.75%	24	37.50%	22	34.38%
16	If error is corrected, learners will not be motivated to speak.	6	9.38%	18	28.13%	30	46.88%	10	15.63%
17	If learners are permitted to make errors in English, it will be difficult for them to speak correctly in their professional career.	6	9.38%	30	46.88%	22	34.38%	6	9.38%
18	The most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from my native language	10	15.63%	22	34.38%	30	46.88%	2	3.13%
19	I would like to learn English so that I can get to know English speaking people better.	20	31.25%	26	40.63%	14	21.88%	4	6.25%
20	If I learn to communicate in English very well, I will have better opportunities to get a good job.	38	59.38%	24	37.50%	0	0.00%	2	3.13%

Results and Discussion

The findings are reported under the five categories of BALLI framework and discussed according to the two research questions.

English Language Aptitude:

The respondents share the same opinion in this category. Unlike results reported in previous studies, the respondents have faith in their own English learning ability, which comes from their confidence as a high proficiency English learner. This is clearly indicated by all respondents agreeing that they believe they will learn to speak English well. This finding consolidates Wu's (2008) and Huang and Tsai's (2003) explanation that success and failure in English learning experiences shape learners' beliefs about their English language aptitude.

The Difficulty in Language Learning

Except 18.75%, the other respondents perceive English not as a difficult language, this does not concur with most of the findings Fujiwara (2011); Peng & Hui (2012); Riley (2006); Sioson (2011). In considering the difficulty of learning English, the majority believe that English is not a difficult language to learn as 82.5 % disagree with 22% “strongly disagree” responses. Regarding the four skills, almost 60% believe that the oral/aural skills are easier than reading and writing. This concurs with the opinion held by teachers who feel that speaking is easier than reading and writing as speaking requires less complex structures, but writing requires contents and complex structures. Approximately 62.5% share the same opinion that comprehending and listening is easier than speaking. Interestingly, a fewer respondents disagree. Their response concurs with the reality that speaking is generally perceived to be difficult among the undergraduates.

Nature of English Language Learning

Significant differences are shown in their belief on the type of learning required to learn a language and the use of translation. Almost 50% emphasize on translation for learning English. They assert that the most important part of learning English is learning how to translate from their native language which means they are mostly dependent on their native language. Students’ opinions are divided on whether English is about acquiring grammar, vocabulary and translation. Almost 78% believe that it is important to learn grammar to learn English while the same percent believe that vocabulary is important in learning English. This indicates that students should be given both grammar and vocabulary in the same proportion as vocabulary is as important as grammar.

Learning and Communication Strategies

The subjects display discordant opinions in the effect of non-immediate correction of error. More than 55% feel that their error will have to be corrected for their future prospects. They claim that non-immediate correction of error may lead to fossilization. Conversely, in the communicative approach frequent correction will inhibit their motivation to communicate. Their responses concur with their preference and resistance to immediate corrections. The other respondents’ tolerance for mistakes is consistent with Peng and Hui’s (2012) findings.

A significant difference is revealed in students’ willingness of attempting to guess unknown words. Almost 47% of them show reluctance in guessing unknown words while the others believe guessing to be a good strategy and they appreciate the value of guessing. However, guessing meaning is a good strategy and teachers encourage learners to attempt guessing unknown words through contexts. Surprisingly, there is a general consensus of agreeing on the practical component as the respondents show a positive response with 78% expressing the need for more practice. This is a good indicator for teachers to give space for more practice through communicative activities in a student centered learning environment.

Motivations and Expectations

There is unanimous agreement with 100% claiming that they want to speak English well, inclusive of 84.5 % “strongly agree” response. The high motivation shown by the learners give them a strong belief that they can learn English well. Almost 94% believe that they need to speak English with good pronunciation while only 6% prefer to have their native like English pronunciation. The inhibition affective factor is reflected in 47% who feel shy to speak in English with other people as reflected in the response to question (14) of the questionnaire. This contradicts the response to question (8), where 88% feel that they should speak English whether it is right or wrong. Approximately 72% believe they need English for survival in Sri Lanka. The intrinsic motivating factor is revealed by 87.5 % of the respondents who enjoy while communicating in English and 97% are motivated in the belief that they will be ensured employable and be secured with good jobs if they possessed good communication skills.

Conclusion

Based on the findings of the present study, the learners held various beliefs about language learning, whether related to individual characteristics or differences in instructional practices. These beliefs likely account for the variation in perception and expectations. Although there is some tendency among group members to share a particular belief and be among the majority group, the minority individuals’ beliefs’ also should be taken into consideration during decision making. Despite the differences they have in their socio economic status, culture, educational and family background, learning styles, motivation and the learners’ previous English learning experiences, it is important to consider the

contextual differences in the language learning situation as well as classroom practices as this would have a greater impact on learner beliefs which will ultimately shape the teachers' beliefs as well. The findings also reveal the importance of giving practice in communication activities that is related to their life experiences. Interestingly, the study stirs the enthusiasm of English teachers as there is a strong urge and motivation on the part of the learners. It is a social responsibility of teachers to recognize the beliefs, needs and interests of learners and provide the necessary platform to achieve the outcome of teaching English in Sri Lanka.

Limitations and direction for future research

This paper identifies learners' beliefs and its contribution at a broader perspective. The beliefs captured by the questionnaire may not elicit the general beliefs of English learners as this is captured from a representative group of learners with a limited sample of study. It can be suggested to use empirical studies on a larger sample to identify whether learner belief is a contributory factor in determining the effectiveness of the teaching and learning process.

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